



# The missing tigers of Ranthambore



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On November 4 this year, Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan which is usually known for the increasing population of tigers, made headlines for a different reason. The Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) of Rajasthan Forest Department, found 25 tigers missing from the park's tiger monitoring report and ordered an immediate inquiry into the matter.

"For long, the tiger monitoring report has been referring to missing tigers from Ranthambore. The field director of the park has not been able to give any satisfactory reply on the issue. There was no solid evidence of 11 tigers for over a year, while 14 tigers had not been found for less than a year," the order from the CWLW Pavan Kumar Upadhyay, said.

Upadhyay also constituted a three-member committee headed by the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), Rajesh Kumar Gupta with the Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), T Mohanraj, and the Deputy Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), Manas Singh as its members. The committee is ordered to submit its report in two months.

However, a complete lack of coordination between the office of the CWLW and the director of Ranthambore National Park came out in the open, as the park director Anoop TR submitted a report confirming the presence of 10 tigers of the 25 reported missing, just two days later. The park officials claimed that these 10 tigers were re-sighted in camera traps from October 10 to November 4, and the matter was already reported to the office of the CWLW. "Perhaps, the office (CWLW) did not update its record and hence the confusion," they said. "Not that the tigers were searched overnight," they added.

Regarding the remaining 15 tigers, the officials from the park told Mongabay India on condition of anonymity, that 11 of the 15 tigers have been missing for more than five years; so there is no question of their return. "It is only the question of four tigers and they can be called missing," they added.

However, the CWLW has a different number for the missing tigers. "The presence of 10 tigers has been confirmed, while nine others were very old and may not be found in the park. The three-member committee formed by me, will look into the status of the remaining six," Upadhyay told Mongabay India. As Ranthambore is popular

among wildlife tourists, the issue of missing tigers has attracted eyeballs. Ranthambore National Park is the single largest expanse of dry deciduous *Anogeissus pendula* forest left intact in India. The Aravalli and the Vindhyan hill ranges meet here and this confluence is perhaps the reason for its rich biodiversity.

Amidst the controversy of missing tigers, an independent organisation Tiger Watch, working for the wildlife conservation in Ranthambore, analysed the status of the remaining 15 tigers. "Seven of them were 19 to 20 years of age and two were 13 to 14 and likely nearing their natural life span," the analysis said.

Conservation biologist and the executive director of Tiger Watch, Dharmendra Khandal, the author of the analysis said, "Tigers typically live up to around 15 years; surviving beyond that age is difficult." Regarding two other tigers, he said, one of them had pregnancy related issues while a 12-year old may have been displaced by a dominant tiger.

"The disappearance of a female tiger (T138) is a matter of concern, and among the 15 missing tigers, the absence of this sub-adult tigress is particularly worrisome," the analysis highlighted. "The most significant loss involves five young male tigers, likely due to intense competition with Ranthambore's dominant males," it added.

## Tiger disappearance is not new at Ranthambore

This is not the first time Ranthambore National Park has faced the issue of missing tigers. Back in 2021, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) ordered an inquiry into 12 missing tigers.

Further investigations revealed that the Kundera and Talada ranges of the tiger reserve accounted for about six of the 12 tigers that actually went missing in 2020. Park officials then blamed high tiger density and the consequent territorial fights as the causes behind the disappearance of the big cats.

An NTCA official then commented that the disappearance of so many tigers from a specific area indicates abnormal activity and should be properly investigated. However, the inquiry report never saw the light of day. Gobind Sagar Bharadwaj, member secretary, NTCA, told Mongabay India, "The 2021 inquiry was completed." However, he did not share its details.

About the recent crisis, he said, "We are keeping an eye on all the aspects. Poaching cannot be ruled out and the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) has also been asked to look into the matter." He added, "We are not leaving any stone unturned to unravel the truth behind the 25 missing tigers of Ranthambore."

## The need for clear guidelines in terminology

While Upadhyay, Tiger Watch and other park officials rule out the possibility of sighting the missing tigers hereon, removing such tigers from the population database is not that simple.

An officer from the Rajasthan Forest Department on the condition of anonymity told Mongabay India, "When would you call your park tiger 'missing'? If it is missing for one week, or 10 days, 30 days or more?" Some of the Ranthambore tigers have returned to the areas with camera traps after two and three months also. All the animals don't reach adulthood and they die somewhere and there is no mechanism to remove them from the park's tiger population data."

"The NTCA says if the carcass is not found it means the tiger is poached," the officer said.

"No tiger death is entered into the database, unless an authentic source from the State Government reports a tiger mortality," the NTCA rule says. The standard operating procedure (SOP) to deal with tiger death states, "Since all tiger deaths are treated as 'Poaching Cases' by the NTCA unless proven otherwise, justification for categorising a tiger death as 'Natural' should be provided along with evidences."

Khandal of Tiger Watch, who has worked for over two decades in Ranthambore, said, "It is very difficult to find a tiger body in the jungle as it decomposes faster than herbivores."

"As a tiger ages and weakens, it instinctively isolates itself, limits its movements, and hides rather than roaming openly. Tigers, with their high muscle density and low body fat, have bodies that break down more quickly due to the nature of muscle tissue, which contains significant water and protein," he added.

However, the real issue which applies to all the parks in India is the analysis of tiger data and the "missing tiger" terminology that has emerged after the latest tiger crisis in Ranthambore. This could become a point of concern for the NTCA.

Talking to Mongabay India, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Head of the Forest (HoFF) of Rajasthan, Arijit Banerjee, said, "Figures (of tigers) need not necessarily be static (in the park), but a dynamic data set (of data)."

Banerjee explained, "Many of the tigers reported missing (in the November 4 CWLW order) have been sighted thereafter, and some of the animals by now are so old that they might not be sighted again and this is a matter of investigation. We are monitoring the situation and good data analysis (of tiger numbers) remains the key."

A senior official from the forest department on condition of anonymity said, "The NTCA has not set up a protocol that would classify a tiger as 'missing' if it disappears for X number of days, and as 'dead' if it is not seen for Y number of days. We need to have some guidelines on when to stop counting the numbers of the aged tigers from our tiger data."

However, if the guidelines of the NTCA are altered to delete the missing tiger from the park tiger population data before its carcass is located, it is likely to be misused as well, another officer from the forest department points out.



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